

Growing Up With John's Beasts: A Rite of Passage

What crazed menagerie is set loose upon the world?
What rough beasts slouch toward Bethlehem?
Charles W. Teel, Jr., on a lifetime with Revelation.

by Charles W. Teel, Jr.

NAMING THE BEASTS THAT PROWL THE PATMOS Zoo of St. John the Divine has been very much a part of my spiritual pilgrimage. And not surprisingly. It was so with my parents and with their parents before them. For we are part of that Adventist religious movement given birth amidst the Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844, when William Miller and his band gathered on New England's bluffs to wait in hope for the end of this present age. Inspired by this confident hope and armed with an approach to biblical

interpretation that biographers have characterized as "wooden literalism," the Millerites embraced a world view that was squarely based on the naming of apocalyptic beasts and portents.

When the end did not come, the Millerite movement foundered and fractured. Following the Great Disappointment, one brother from Maine reported more in earnestness than in humor that some of the remnant band continued on in hope, others had turned to strong drink, and still others had gone to California! As the son of a Nebraska farm boy *cum* Adventist pastor, it fell my lot one century later to continue on in hope, to eschew strong drink, and to follow my parents to a parish in California.

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Our three-week trek from Maryland to California was made just after mid-century in the family's 1952 Chevrolet sedan. Because the trip came in the middle of the school year, and I was missing classes, I religiously studied my seventh-grade Bible textbook *en route*. The learning objective of the unit under consideration was unlocking the secrets of the Apocalypse. As we journeyed across the Great Plains, I roped, tied, and branded the beasts of St. John. The mysteries of the 666 conundrum were resolved while we navigated the terrain that would later evoke John Denver's pop hit "Rocky Mountain High." The Arizona desert was the venue in which I memorized historical footnotes corresponding to the seven trumpets, the seven angels, the seven seals, and the seven plagues. Although the car radio played newscasts on the Joseph McCarthy congressional hearings as well as an occasional Pete Seeger song of social protest, it never occurred to me to identify either McCarthy or Seeger as participants in the great controversy depicted by St. John. For at my tender young age I knew that prophets resided in a sacred and slightly unreal past, and were preoccupied with a heavenly

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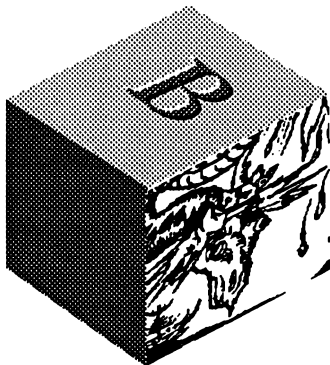
The new kid from the Eastern seaboard who saluted Loma Linda Elementary School's seventh-grade teacher with the strange term

"ma'am" did himself proud in the spring of 1952. He earned an A+ on the unit test covering the Book of Revelation. My teacher attributed this sterling performance to the disciplined home of a pastor. She was, I think, partially correct. Not inconsequential for my performance, however, was my desire to impress another seventh-grader whose dazzling smile, white dress, and red rose dominated my pubescent consciousness. I was inspired that spring to use acrostics to memorize beasts and times and dividing of times.

Spiritual formation had indeed contributed to my seventh-grade mastery of John's beasts. I first met these marvelous mutants at age five when contemplating the drawings in Uriah Smith's ponderous tome on apocalyptic literature entitled *Daniel and the Revelation*. For hours on end I literally wondered

after these beasts, with no detail of horns or wings or hooves escaping my attention. Of course I was too young to ascertain the meaning that the author attached to them. But I knew that my father, my mother, and our much-loved conference president—a church official and *ipso facto* one who personified all that was good and right and true and secure—knew exactly what these beasts stood for. And that was enough to make my world good and right and true and secure.

The universal significance of John's menagerie was heightened by evangelists who enlivened parish life in our Minnesota and Maryland congregations. Papier-mâché props, then plywood cutouts, then Ducane Projector transparencies, and then glow-in-the-dark "black light" visuals filled the stages of tents and



tabernacles and public halls. The beasts loomed larger than life, dwarfing the evangelists, and offered a tapestry of cosmic proportions within which all of humankind's questions of meaning found direct and specific answers. During these decades of vintage Adventist evangelism, I babysat a younger brother on wooden folding chairs and looked on with pride as my mother played the vibraharp and my father introduced such "world traveled" evangelists as Fordyce Detamore. Topics included "Will Germany [previously Turkey and later Russia] Rule the World?" "The Rise and Fall of Empires," "The Battle of Armageddon," and "God's One True Church."

By now I was old enough to follow a bit of the argumentation, to comprehend the methods of biblical interpretation, to link texts together, and to add numbers that totaled 666. And although I had no idea what the term *empirical* meant, I nodded vigorously when the evangelist asserted that he had demonstrated empirically that the Pope was the little horn, that the Catholic Church was Babylon, and that the Seventh-day Adventist Church, headquartered in Takoma Park, Maryland, constituted God's true remnant church that would "go through" to the end of time. I requested baptism. (Only later would I come to recognize the triumphalism and exclusivism communicated in a baptismal vow that required affirmation that "the Seventh-day Adventist Church *constitutes* God's remnant church. . . .")

When the religion curriculum called for study of the beasts once again during my junior year at Loma Linda Academy (the cycle would once again repeat itself during my sophomore year of college), it became clear that the evangelists' teaching techniques, if not their interpretations, had served me well. I wrote yet another perfect examination. My classmates and I—who all looked alike and boasted neither foreign accents nor dark skin tones—

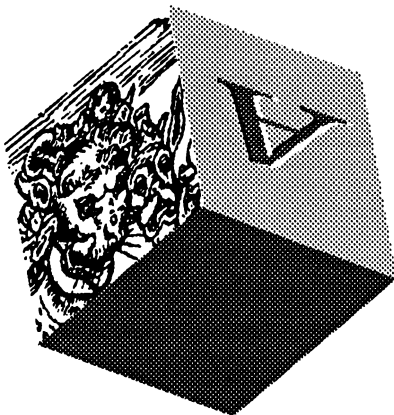
bathed in the peace and prosperity and bland uniformity of the fabulous '50s. Chimes tolled from the tower of the Loma Linda Sanitarium and Hospital, wafting over scented orange groves and a contented community untroubled by freeways, outsiders, or beasts. Our advance knowledge of the sweep of human history tied up all loose ends. Our universe was secure: God was in his heaven, Dwight David Eisenhower was in the White House, Pat Boone and Doris Day were wholesome role models, the beasts were catalogued and in their rightful place, and all was well with the world.

Two developments threatened my peaceful existence: entrance into college and the National Guard-enforced high school integration in Little Rock, Arkansas. A crop of interesting and interested teachers with fresh Ph.D. diplomas in hand called a generation of college students to the excitement of pursuing the idea. A recently created general-studies curriculum posed question after question. What is the scientific method? What are the limits of the scientific method? What are my sources of authority? How do I know what I know? How do I know what is true? What is myth? Why do persons and societies need such grand and sweeping stories? How have poets and theologians and scientists and prophets and painters and architects and playwrights spoken to these issues? What constitutes salvation? How does mankind (that is the word which even interesting and interested persons used in those days) experience salvation? How is redemption mediated? What is involved in "finish-



ing the work”? And what does all this have to do with Little Rock? Then Montgomery. Then Selma. Then Birmingham.

New beasts began circling on the horizon of my cozy encampment, and that made me uncomfortable. I was now having questions about the religious community that had given



me birth. William Miller was a part of my very being, yet his “wooden literalism” troubled me.

I was awed by Uriah Smith’s detailed footnotes and exhaustive grasp

of human history, yet his far-reaching grasp of divine history was beginning to appear too neat, too ordered, and too concrete. I cautiously and tentatively entertained the possibility that Uriah Smith’s formulations could be less than final. Still, I balked at acting on the nudges that my college teachers were providing; their attempts to expand my universe and introduce me to the possibilities of identifying contemporary beasts.

If I were to allow Uriah Smith’s copious classification of John’s beasts to be in any way revised, wouldn’t my universe fall apart? Hadn’t my perfect scores on two examinations demonstrated that I had solved the riddle of human history? And wouldn’t tampering with the locks that kept those beasts in cages open a Pandora’s box? Would not these beasts multiply like proverbial rabbits?

Things were getting out of hand. I wanted to return to the certainty and security of the 1950s. (When confronted at this point in my spiritual journey with a multiple-choice test item on defining *myth*—[a] falsehood; [b] fairy tale; [c] cosmic story or integrated symbol system bringing meaning and motivation to human experience—I circled “c” as the the correct

option. Yet even though my definition of myth had matured sufficiently to allow me to discount “a” and “b,” I was not about to recast the symbols that gave shape to my belief system: if Uriah Smith’s beasts could cover the existential nakedness of Adventist evangelists and believers whose lives spanned a full century, who was I to tamper with these portents?)

Indeed, several developments of my early college years exemplify my hesitation to seriously rethink the imaging of John’s beasts. First: to offset the confusion created when one religion teacher’s eschatological chart placed the close of probation just before the national Sunday law and another teacher argued for the opposite, I burrowed extensively into Uriah Smith’s definition of the beasts and pored over numerous texts to ascertain “empirically” which teacher was correct.

Second, upon hearing that a black Adventist pastor from Mississippi had gone to jail rather than be turned back from the counter where he attempted to register to vote, my response was to question why he was “getting mixed up in political issues” rather than “finishing the work entrusted to God’s remnant.”

Third, a final, if less than successful, attempt to engineer a return to the womb of the 1950s came as I broke free from my apolitical tradition to vote for Richard Nixon and against the Catholic John F. Kennedy in the 1960 elections—even an apostate Protestant was to be preferred over an opponent who so clearly represented the forces of Babylon.

Then came study at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. I was nurtured by dedicated Adventist scholars who decades earlier had wrestled with William Miller’s hermeneutics and who had been blessed but not limited by Uriah Smith’s categories and classifications.

I was also intrigued by two reproductions on the wall of the seminary reading room that graphically depicted the belief system that held James White’s universe together. They also demonstrated his ability to alter and

change even major symbols in that overarching cosmic story that is the Great Controversy. White's earlier graphic expressed a world view dominated by the law, whereas the later representation of his symbol system unambiguously placed the cross at the center of history.

If James White's cosmic story could be open to change and growth and development, perhaps I could step beyond the comfortable womb of my 1950s symbol system: Perhaps I could risk belief in a God who continued to work in history, rather than one whose activity in history had been frozen by Uriah Smith's interpretations of St. John's visions.

Once this liberating discovery had dawned, seminary professors could help me to see that certainty and security consist less in having a blueprint of history than knowing that God continues to be both above and within history; and that in God's great scheme of things we must always be open to manifold surprises.

I discovered that God asks not that we line up our historical footnotes like ducks in a row. Rather, God asks that in response to the saving act of Jesus Christ we ally with remnant communities in every age and stand against those Babylonian beasts that oppose what is true and just.

To affirm a belief in the God of history is, not least of all, to respond in history where God is acting—and to be open to the surprises that God has in store. Most liberating of all was the discovery that such a step did not require me to abandon my grounding in Miller and Smith. Indeed, in finding contemporary significance

for John's beasts, I found myself standing on their shoulders.

I am much indebted to Adventist stalwarts such as Roland Loasby and F. E. J. Harder, to Methodist churchman Walter Muelder, to Mennonite Lawrence Burkholder, and to Baptist Harvey Cox (among numerous others), who helped me grapple with those eschatological and apocalyptic passages of Scripture that are key to Adventism's identity.

Harder's exegesis of Matthew 24 and 25 helped me understand that those who second-guess the God of history with their "es-

chatology/chronology" charts are explicitly cast as unfaithful believers, whereas those open to being surprised by the God of history and those serving "the least of these" are characterized as the ones who wait faithfully.

Muelder led me to see that Moses' covenant and Jesus' kingdom demand

that humankind's justice be modeled on Yahweh's righteousness: thus, to wait faithfully for God's kingdom is to work earnestly for that kingdom. Burkholder so capably described the church as a radical remnant, a community of witness and service that even with the institutionalism, patriarchalism, and preoccupation with status and power found in today's church, I can still utter (with Robert McAfee Brown) "two cheers for the church!" And it was Loasby's Greek exegesis of the Apocalypse and Cox's seminars on feasts, fools, religion, and secular cities that enabled St. John's symbols to come alive—not merely in the cloistered church—but also in the marketplace of the world.

Septuagenarian Loasby revelled in "stirring

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up your pure minds.” Like other mentors, he showed me that prophets indeed spend far more energy “forth-telling” in the present tense than “foretelling” in the future tense. As he helped us exegete the Apocalypse, the Tree of Life, the Sea of Glass, Babylonian Beasts, and Faithful Remnants could loom from daily newsprint no less than from India paper with gilded edges.

By way of supporting his contention that the sacred and the secular—as well as the present and the future—were of one piece, Loasby never tired of quoting that Ellen White passage in which the boughs of the Tree of Life are said to hang over the walls of the New Jerusalem and to reach into our very real and present world. It was a liberating discovery to learn that the Tree of Life “whose leaves bring healing to the nations” may equally inspire our commitment to the peacekeeping endeavors of the United Nations as enkindle an eternal hope.

If the Tree of Life held implications for humankind’s present as much as its future, ought not the same hold for Babylonian structures and remnant communities?

Discovery takes place in the ivory tower of academia as ideas are discussed. Discovery also takes place when theory takes hands and feet and tries to walk city streets. It was in pastoring a downtown Boston congregation

that I grasped an expanded understanding of John’s beasts. In ministering to their flocks, pastors routinely encounter the demons of alienation, separation, unfaithfulness, hopelessness, helplessness, and escapism. These evil powers are manifest in every congregation and every culture.



Pastoring in this urban setting enabled me to empathize with brothers and sisters who daily confronted beasts of racism, sexism, and tokenism; beasts of ethnocentrism, nationalism, and imperialism; beasts of consumerism, commercialism, and corporate greed; beasts that wield power in a manner that enables them to prowl, pounce, demean, and infect not only individual existence, but also institutional and corporate life.

A single illustration will suffice. At mid-century, the Boston Seventh-day Adventist Temple boasted a thriving 500-member congregation, a 12-grade school, a sprawling physical plant, and pastors whose preaching attire included striped trousers and morning coats. By 1970 the threescore souls who graced the Temple’s pews mirrored the neighborhood’s yeasty population mix as well as that of the low-income apartment building directly across the street: a clutch of octogenarian Anglos and a four-fifths migrant and immigrant majority comprised chiefly of graduate students, southern blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Caribbeans.

Students residing in the apartment complex (owned by a slumlord whose real-estate holdings included two-thirds of Boston’s low-income housing) documented fire-code irregularities, and petitioned for inspections. After receiving no response from either the management or the city authorities they mounted an unsuccessful rent strike. When a fire broke out in the building some months later, gutting the upper floors and snuffing out the lives of eight residents, it came to light that the city official responsible for enforcing fire-code compliance was the slumlord’s brother-in-law.

Under such conditions, how ought a prophetic congregation to respond: As a prayer circle? A soup kitchen? A first-aid station? A storage center? A community-organizing agency? An investigative reporting team? A civil-disobedience cadre chained together on a balcony of the charred fourth floor while

reading aloud from the book of Amos, Ellen White's *Welfare Ministry*, and those passages from the Apocalypse that rebuke Babylonian powers for trading in the "souls of men"? or all of the above?

Members of this urban congregation led me to recognize that numerous impersonal and institutional beasts require slaying. And if slaying such beasts is impossible, they must at least be named for what they are. They must be held up as the manipulating, corrupting, and corroding powers of Babylon. Over and against these Babylonian beasts stands the faithful remnant.

With the angels of Revelation 14, this faithful remnant announces the bad news of Babylon, proclaims the good news that Babylon is fallen, and asserts that the powerless, vulnerable, but faithful true will indeed triumph. The remnant can do this with assurance because the God of history has declared it so!

During the decade of the 1960s, characterized by the national social evils of racism and war, I found myself responding to Martin Luther King's earlier call to disobey unjust laws in an open and nonviolent manner. As a result of witnessing against the beast of institutional racism, I found myself in a Southern jail. As I was the youngest person in the jail cell, it fell my lot to bed down on the top of a three-tiered bunk, within inches of the ceiling. A previous occupant had inscribed a two-line poem on the uneven plaster: "Where there's dope, there's hope." Not to be outdone, I drew upon images of the Apocalypse as I penned an "Ode to Brother Augustus Newman." Newman was a beloved parishioner/elder/saint in our Boston congregation whose decades of service to the poor of Boston's inner city helped me see that not only beastly powers but remnant communities take many shapes and sizes.

Some years later I returned to Harvard's campus for a summer-long seminar sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Participants were encouraged to mine

their own religious traditions for ways in which they both imbibed and resisted dominant culture.

Happily, I found sources showing how my religious forbears condemned slavery as a demonic and dragonic expression of that beast of the Apocalypse that had the horns of a lamb, yet spoke as a dragon.

I also learned that, as the century progressed, religious-liberty concerns evoked similar characterizations of national public policy. I further discovered that at the turn of the century an esteemed Adventist evangelist inveighed against U.S. colonialist undertakings in the Philippines and cited this action as one more example of John's two-horned beast raising its head.

Imagine my happy surprise just three summers ago upon discovering that socially conscious Catholic priests in the Peruvian highlands extolled pioneer Adventist missionaries Fernando and Ana Stahl as their "spiritual forbears" and "missioner mentors." This endorsement stemmed from the fact that the Stahls' interpretation of the gospel led them to confront the Babylonian beasts of ignorance and drugs and religious intolerance fostered by the "near feudal" social system existing in Peru's vast Lake Titicaca Basin at the turn of the century.

Underscoring the social and structural nature of the Stahl witness, one priest enthused: "The gospel which the Stahls proclaimed was enacted not only in chapels and clinics and schools but also in city halls, town law courts, and the national legislature." He concluded with a phrase that carries an even sharper punch in Spanish than in English: "In the truest sense the Stahls were missionaries, visionaries, and revolutionaries."

Why is Fernando Stahl memorialized by a statue in Peru—the only North American to be so honored? Precisely because he and Ana formed a remnant community that allied with other remnant communities. Precisely be-

cause this couple stood against Babylonian forces that permitted a 5 percent white and *mestizo* population to coerce and manipulate and fence out the 95 percent indigenous population. The first indigenous and first coeducational school system, which they founded, exhibited a remnant presence that helped force Babylonian structures to crumble.

So extensive were the changes wrought, that within a single generation the eldest son of one of the Stahls' first converts would be elected to represent the formerly fenced-out peoples of these highlands in Peru's national legislature (see "The Radical Roots of Peruvian Adventism," *Spectrum*, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 5-18).

Such discoveries helped me see that the church I love includes a great cloud of witnesses who have come to terms with John's beasts. These rugged pioneers who peeled back layers of cultural practice and religious instruction in order to confront contemporary beasts and communicate the remnant message to distant peoples deserve to be remembered.

To that end, my classes on eschatological hope and apocalyptic portents now include "show and tell" components that demonstrate the manner in which Adventist missionary pioneers boldly went forth to found remnant communities and to confront Babylonian beasts. Students interview colleagues of these pioneers and record oral histories. Mission collections donated to our fledgling mission museum enliven the discussion. And field study (plus student missionary appointments and ADRA internships) enable students to walk in the footsteps of these "missionaries, visionaries, and revolutionaries."

Only as we tell the stories of these apocalyptic beasts in the present tense will contemporary Adventist young people consider appropriating Adventism's cosmic story as their story. For our sons and daughters who dream dreams and see visions, like the pioneers we hold up to them, are not content to fight the beasts of another time and place only—any more than John or Paul or Augustine or Peter Waldo or Martin Luther or William Miller or Uriah Smith were content to fight the beasts of another generation. In fact, some beasts fought by remnant communities of a

previous generation may no longer be baring their fangs—or have the strength to even gum their opponents into submission. To be faithful to the remnant message is not merely to fight the beasts of those who have gone before, but to rename the beasts under the pressure of every

new generation. (This contemporizing process should not be surprising to a people whose earliest periodicals boasted the titles *Present Truth*, *Signs of the Times*, and *These Times*.)

A Catholic student in Haiti invited me to share my expanded definitions of beasts and remnants in a setting not exactly of my own choosing. I was teaching a graduate course that included pastors and health professionals, evenly divided between Adventists and Catholics.

With the Adventist union conference president sitting in on the last three days of the class, an articulate Catholic physician posed what was to be the final question: "I understand that Adventists draw on the images of the Apocalypse in naming Catholics as the false

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Babylonian power and themselves as the true remnant. Would you care to comment on this?" I offered my response understanding slowly and deliberately:

- The Apocalypse, from which the images of Babylon and remnant are taken, clearly identifies these images with institutional and corporate entities. Sin and salvation thus find expression not only in individual hearts but also in the traditions and structures of church and society.

- Babylonian realities in the Apocalypse correspond to those institutions that give expression to the beastly, the manipulative, the coercive, and the corrosive dimensions of human behavior. Remnant realities are made up of the defenseless, the powerless, the vulnerable, the faithful, and the true. Forms of these expressions change, of course, but they manifest themselves in human history anew in every generation.

- The Catholic Church has indisputably engaged in more Babylonian activity than any other Christian body. For example, I have stood silently with my Spanish wife in Madrid's Plaza Mayor paying tribute to those who succumbed to the early fires of the Inquisition. Further, I have sat on a 100-pound sack of corn while riding in the back of a stake truck with a Colombian Adventist pastor in his 80s who still bore the lash marks of being tied to a tree and beaten by Catholic assailants merely because he professed Protestantism.

- Yet it must be noted that Catholicism has had some 12 centuries longer than any other Christian body to wreak havoc.

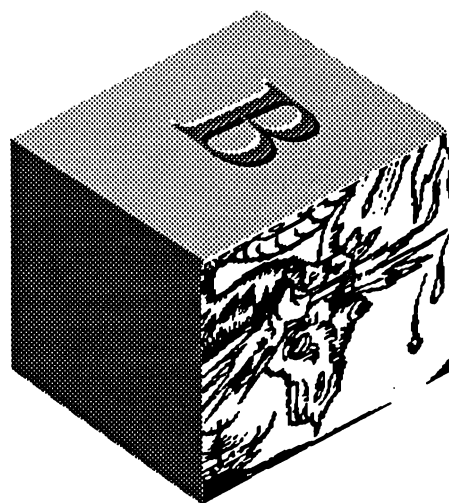
- God and St. John are both sold short when any single institution or community is classified as thoroughly remnant or exclusively Babylon. To equate Catholicism with Babylon overlooks too many Catholic clergy and lay people on three continents whom I have learned to love precisely because they act as a remnant.

To define Adventism as constituting God's remnant exhibits a triumphalism that cancels

out the need for continued critical self-examination of where our religious community falls short of God's remnant ideal: our own preoccupation with power and our wrestlings with the beasts of parochialism, ethnocentrism, sexism, and institutionalism. We do not "constitute" God's remnant, yet we are indeed called to be a part of God's remnant, called to proclaim the message of John's angels, the liberating news that Babylon has fallen.

More recently, the good news that the defenseless remnant wins over the oppressive Babylon structures and institutions led me to create a celebrative worship liturgy. Art students sculpted candlesticks and brass players rehearsed Gabrielli. Grade schoolers were invited to draw pictures of St. John's beasts. These same children were asked to draw pictures of events noted in the world press illustrating Babylon and the remnant. Academy students clipped photos from news magazines past and present that depicted either oppressive Babylonian structures or empowering remnant communities. College students sifted through historical sources to document stories of contemporary beasts and remnants.

Later, as worship began, the candles of the seven churches were lit, stories were told, St. John's passages were read, drawings and photos were shared. A congregation was thus led to celebrate and experience the good news that the Baby wins over the beast; that psalms of praise drown out imperial edicts; that Rosa Parks can emerge victorious over a system of Jim Crow segregation laws; that truth conquers false-



hood; that the hope of Dietrich Bonhoeffer outlasts the terror wrought by his Nazi executioners; that the pregnant and vulnerable and defenseless woman of Revelation 12 triumphs over the dragon; that contemporary churchwomen will one day experience the equality of an inclusive gospel; that the woes accorded an unrighteous Babylon give way to the shouts of Alleluia uttered by the faithful remnant.

Following this liturgical celebration, members of the congregation remained to inspect

sculptured candelabra, to view crayoned canvasses, and to share impressions of beasts recently named. I overheard a pastor sum up her experience of the morning: "Until today I missed the forest for the trees in the Book of Revelation. I had memorized names and dates and battles and kingdoms and beasts but had failed to see how sweeping and contemporary the good news of the Apocalypse really is."

The rite of passage continues. Alleluia and amen!